Social Capital and Religion across Different Contexts: A Critical Discussion on the Potential of Churches and Religious Organizations to Create Social Capital

Radu, Bogdan Mihai; Angi, Daniela; Burciu, Roxana

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SOCIAL CAPITAL AND RELIGION ACROSS DIFFERENT CONTEXTS: A CRITICAL DISCUSSION ON THE POTENTIAL OF CHURCHES AND RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS TO CREATE SOCIAL CAPITAL[1]

BOGDAN MIHAI RADU, DANIELA ANGI, ROXANA BURCIU

Abstract. Higher social capital is often associated with better quality of democracy (Putnam 1993, Warren 2001). Social capital is a unique type of resource in the sense that the more it is used, the more it becomes available, and therefore it is important to explore how social capital can be generated. In this paper, we evaluate the potential that churches and religious organizations present in creating social capital. We identify structural constraints faced by churches and religious organizations engaged in this process. We argue that institutional survival concerns and social understandings of the roles played by religion and church in democratic societies may influence the potential for social capital to be constructed in the context of religious participation as well as the type of generated social capital. Moreover, we also discuss the implications of epistemological choices on measuring the relationship between church participation and social capital, and advocate methodological diversity and interdisciplinary research initiatives, at times, in the detriment of generalizability.

Keywords: *social capital; religion; democracy; secularization; civil society.*

This paper advances a tentative research agenda for studying social capital generated by churches and membership in religious organizations. We ask what are the theoretical directions that can be fruitfully employed to explore how membership in religious organizations impacts on individuals' social capital and how the wider community benefits from religious activism? Most of the attention received by social capital in the last decades focuses on its effects on the quality of democracy, and so our discussion is placed within the realm of democratic societies, either

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traditional or more recent.[2] Therefore, we focus on the potential constraints faced by churches and religious organizations within democratic systems, and their effect on social capital construction. We argue that the literature has been dominated mostly by research conducted in the United States, which represents a unique case study displaying specific understandings of the relationship between religion and social capital. In the first section, we define and characterize social capital, focusing on its beneficial effects on the quality of democracy. Second, we focus on social capital produced within religious organizations and highlight several constraints faced by churches when assuming the role of social capital creator. Among these constraints, we identify institutional limitations, socially desirable forms of religious behavior, and the influence of traditionally constructed church-state relationships. Third, we conclude and formulate recommendations for interdisciplinary research.

Diverging conceptualizations of social capital

In recent decades, the field of social sciences witnessed a notable revitalization of interest in social capital (Kay and Johnston 2007). Often employed in connection to its purported positive effects for individuals, communities, even societies as a whole, social capital is used in relation to a wide range of processes, such as activism, civic responsibility and solidarity, development and democratic effectiveness. This widening semantic umbrella provides a generous space for studies that focus on different aspects of social capital. The lack of convergence in the theorization of social capital extends over a number of important aspects that include the broad theoretical approach within which social capital is conceptually defined and the level of conceptualization. The avenues opened by opting for one direction are consequential for what is

[2] By the distinction between traditional and recent democracies we mean the differences between societies that democratized in a lengthy period of time, and are considered consolidated, mostly "Western" democracies; the distinction is meant to cover the whole range of democratic systems, including the most recent waves of democratization (Central and Eastern Europe, for example).

included in the definition of social capital. As Van Deth (2003, 84) points out, "distinguishing between the two conceptualizations of social capital (individual vs collective property) is important because it implies the selection of quite different research strategies".

Grootaert et al. (2004, 3) locate two chief theoretical approaches that define its conceptualization: one that draws from the sociological tradition and a second approach, closer to political science. The sociological approach focuses on the resources that individuals can benefit from by virtue of the networks they belong to. Such implications of instrumentality are also present in Bourdieu's (1986) and Coleman's (1988) assessments and in the theorization of social capital that focuses on the use of social networks (e.g. Lin 1999; 2001).

The political science direction is concerned with patterns of engagement and activism that individuals develop in their communities and organizations they belong to (Grootaert et al. 2004). This second understanding has flourished due to Putnam's writings about the effect of civic vibrancy on the quality of democracy (e.g. Putnam 1993). The sociological tradition of theorization tends to emphasize the "individual advantages" produced by networks, whereas, the political science direction is concerned with the macro level and the effects of social capital on the quality of democracy (Stolle 2007, 659).

The development of the concept of social capital in the sociological tradition has been marked most significantly by the theoretical and conceptual frameworks proposed by Bourdieu and Coleman. Both authors pay particular attention to the specific social contexts in which individuals are embedded. In Bourdieu's approach, "the volume of the social capital possessed by a given agent […] depends on the size of the network of connections he can effectively mobilize and on the volume of the capital (economic, cultural or symbolic) possessed […] by each of those to whom he is connected." (Bourdieu 1986, 249) For Coleman, "[S]ocial capital is defined by its function. It is not a single entity, but a variety of different entities, with two elements in common: they all consist of some aspect of social structures, and they facilitate certain actions of actors […] social capital is productive, making possible the achievement of certain ends." (Coleman 1988, S98)

Repeatedly, in the discussion on social capital, there is a strong argument on the relational nature of this resource. Lin (1999, 31) outlines the main explanations for how resources located in social networks help individuals: (1) social networks enable "the flow of information"; (2) "social ties […] may exert influence on the agents […] who can play a critical role in decisions […] involving the actor"; (3) "social tie resources" may act as the "individual's social credentials", which are important if she/he is to be accepted in a group; (4) "social relations are expected to reinforce identity and recognition." Consequently, there is an assumption that, "actors are cognitively aware of these resources and consciously choose to access them." (Stolle 2007, 657)

Undeniably, what is considered part of social capital varies across disciplines. Edwards and Foley (2001, 12) note that sociological research tends "to conceptualize social capital as primarily a social structural variable, using it to describe social networks, organizations, or linkages between individuals and/or organizations." Conversely, for political science, economics and psychology, social capital is predominantly about attitudes (such as tolerance and trust) and membership in association is seen "more as a source of social capital than as another form of it" (Edwards and Foley 2001, 12). Political science contributed to the consecration of a particular understanding of social capital as a feature of communities. This trend has been strongly influenced by Putnam's writings (1993; 2000) and the meanings he attributed to social capital. Social capital is seen by Putnam (2000, 19) as consisting of "connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them." Thus understood, social capital becomes a resource that can be "simultaneously a 'private good' and a 'public good'" (Putnam 2000, 20).

The conceptual travel of social capital from individual to community-level has not been left without reactions. For instance, in Portes' view, there are a number of difficulties that challenge the explanatory power of the concept, as well as the precision of the arguments. In brief, these difficulties refer to: the clarity about the actual meaning of social capital; the danger of circularity (as the causes and effects of collective social capital are often not clearly distinguishable); and the provision of general propositions about a link between civicness

and political performance that underscore potential alternative explanations (Portes 2000, 3-5).

Placed at the intersection of different disciplines, and thus approached from a variety of theoretical and methodological perspectives, social capital became a widespread analytical category, for its potential usefulness in making sense of how groups and communities perform and produce benefits for individuals as well as for the larger collectivities.

Social capital and democracy

One of the reasons why *social capital* gained such notoriety has to do with the frequent attempts to capture its impact on the quality of democracy or effectiveness of democratic processes. The varieties of approaches on this matter share a basic implicit assumption, according to which "social capital provides democracy with a structural and cultural foundation" (Lasinska 2013, 42). Illustrations of specific issues addressed in this sense include the relation between social capital and democratic citizenship (Rossteutscher 2008), and the impact of individual social capital on commitment to democratic values (Rose and Weller 2003).

Some of the scholarship that addresses the link between social capital and democracy refers to the newly established democracies of Central Eastern Europe. For instance, Letki (2004) examined the effects of interpersonal trust and membership in associations on political involvement in post-communist countries, on data from mid-nineties. In doing so, Letki (2004, 675) underlined the "limited usefulness of the concept of social capital in explaining levels and patterns of political activism in democratizing countries." Thus, an additional question is raised, concerning the full applicability to newly democratized countries of a concept devised as an explanatory tool for the realities in consolidated democracies (Lasinska 2013, 42-43).

The link between trust and social capital, in the discussions about democracy, is of particular importance. References to trust and social capital are found in the sociological tradition as well, for instance in Coleman's writings about groups and communities. In his view, "a group within which there is extensive trustworthiness and extensive

trust is able to accomplish much more than a comparable group without that trustworthiness and trust." (Coleman 1988, S101) Thus, trust can turn into a relative advantage of a group in terms of reaching particular goals. At the same time, the meaning of trust as used by Coleman is different than the sense embedded in the references to social trust specific to political science. In view of that, Edwards and Foley (2001, 10) observe that *trust* in the sense used by Coleman is "a feature of the specific context in which specified individuals or classes of individuals can be trusted", thus being inherently embedded in particular social structures. In political science research, trust, together with other civic skills, such as learning to cooperate with others are often discussed in relation to people's membership and activism in associations (Hooghe 2003, Newton 2001). Yet associations seem to considerably differ in terms of the impact they have on constructing reciprocity, trust and connections between their members. Stolle and Rochon (1998) found the effects of associational membership on selected social capital indictors to be sensitive to the type of association in question. In their analysis, religious organizations (included under the general umbrella of cultural associations) are found to be more likely to include members who score high on generalized trust and have a heightened sense of reciprocity with their neighbors.

In a similar vein, Paxton (2002) discusses the different impact that „connected" and „isolated" associations have on democracy, due to their different effects on the production of social capital (bridging versus bonding). Paxton argues that connected associations are more likely to enforce democracy, whereas isolated associations may hinder it. In her assessment, connected associations include a wide range of cultural, educational, social and community organizations, whereas trade unions, sports and religious associations are rather of the isolated type. Furthermore, Foley, Edwards and Diani (2001, 279) point out that "[H]owever conceived, "social capital" plays out differently in different settings, depending on both informal and formal elements of social organization. Its meaning for the polity is rarely direct or unambiguous and is highly mediated by the character of the polity itself". Although social capital is a rich construct and became an analytical tool comparable in notoriety and usage to its close kin, "civil society," there

is little or no disagreement among various disciplines on the need to acknowledge the multi-dimensionality of this concept (Grootaert *et al* 2004) and to translate this complexity in finely tuned research methodologies.

Celebrated or at times contested, social capital became a significant concept in social sciences, both in Western and non-Western contexts. Its multidisciplinary and multidimensional nature turned social capital into a fertile framework for analyzing the patterns and outcomes of people's interactions and associative behavior. In addition, research focused on the construction of democratic values and social trust contributed to social capital becoming an important part of the wider discussion on the social foundations of democracy. The remaining part of the article resumes these aspects and directs the arguments towards the construction of social capital through churches and religious organizations.

Church and social capital in democratic contexts – the challenge of diversity

In principle, many churches could contribute to social capital formation among their confidants, but we do not take it for granted that most churches do. Indeed, much of our central argument revolves around identifying constraints and limitations churches and religious organizations face, in the context of potentially becoming social capital creators.[3] Simply put, a church can become a creator of social capital if it can, if it wants to, and if it is socially and morally acceptable to do so. Nevertheless, none of these conditions are fixed in time, and churches and religious organizations are subject to change and adaptation in order to reflect the dynamic contexts in which they are embedded. Churches both offer and interpret meaning, and their roles within society are permanently redefined. One effect of such recalibration could be the creation of social capital.

There is ample evidence that, in some contexts, religiosity and religious participation are positively correlated with higher social capital. Robert

[3] In our understanding, the difference between churches and religious organizations resides in the fact that religious organizations, while containing an important religious element, aim to solve rather social problems; churches are institutions, places of worship, essentially geared towards religious services, while also being able to accommodate a social mission.

Wuthnow (1994) argues that in the US, religious organizations are deeply rooted in the communities in which they serve, and facilitate interpersonal interaction for the benefit of solving community problems. In a study of the effects of religious involvement on establishing connections with other social economic categories (upward mobility), Wuthnow (2002) finds out that religiously engaged people have more elites in their circle of acquaintances, be them political or economic. This result is interpreted as suggestive of bridging social capital in religious organizations. Effects are mediated by the size of the congregation or the type of elite one ends up befriending in church, but the evidence is clear: congregations can be arenas for gaining access to networks of people with higher socio-economic status.

The importance of the distinction between bonding and bridging social capital in relation to religious participation is perhaps best captured in Beyerlein (2005). The analysis contrasts the bonding character of American Evangelical Protestantism and the bridging preference of American mainline Protestants and Catholics. The author explores a correlation between type of congregation (closed/exclusive or more open) and crime rate in a community: in Evangelical Protestant communities crime rates are higher than in mainline Protestant or Catholic communities. The argument is that bonding social capital – communities characterized by strong ties, inner view and exclusive membership – is detrimental to communication and it is precisely the self-centered character of the group that renders it incapable of engaging with other groups and thus solve social problems.

Smidt (2003) reviews a massive amount of literature concurring that participation in religious organizations, in the US, has multiple benefits for the quality of their political system: religiously participatory people are more motivated to participate, are more community oriented and more generous, they vote more often, and the effect of their religious participation spills over to the broader community, making it more trustworthy and civic oriented. Strømsnes (2008) also finds that religiously active people are more trusting of others and more politically engaged, but different types of religious involvement display different magnitude of effects: being engaged in religious activities is much stronger connected to trust and tolerance of diversity, than church

attendance or mere often empty membership. Results also show evidence of bridging social capital.

The Civic Volunteerism Model (CVM) developed by Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995) accounts for the mobilizing role of the civil society and is a good example of how church going can lead to the acquisition of civic skills. Participation in non-political organizations, such as churches, creates a familiarity with the ways organizations function and give the individual a feeling of efficacy. In the case of churches, the authors explain that they have the benefit of moderating resource inequalities existent in the American system. While acquisition of civic skills within church is not equivalent to social capital formation, we do see a connection between the two in the sense of focusing on civic engagement and, ultimately, supporting participation. The authors warn that not all churches have the same impact on creating civic skills. Protestant churches fare better at empowering citizens, being more focused on debate and participatory practices. The Catholic Church, however, is not an effective civic skills provider, due to its strictly hierarchical organization. In brief, the church as a member of the civil society has the potential of empowering citizens, who, in turn, could become more politically active, and more politically efficacious. In the case of the Black American community, Brown (2003) finds that church participation can be conducive to more political engagement, but only if deliberate steps are taken for transmitting information, knowledge and skills. Exposure to political debates and discussion is critical in influencing congregation members to become more politically active, and mere church going is not sufficient. Given that for many Black Americans the church is one the few arenas of participation, its role in inculcating a participatory political culture among their believers is all the more important.

One can conclude then that within the US, churches can be arenas for acquiring civic skills and represent significant contributors to social capital creation. Nevertheless, the US system is unique, and we focus on deconstructing this uniqueness in order to understand the generalizable potential of research findings mentioned above.

First, the American system is based on a Toquevillian understanding of a pluralist civil society, in which citizens participate in multiple

overlapping groups, aiming to solve collective problems. Second, religious pluralism and a clear de jure separation between church and state are defining features of the American system. Competition between churches within a free religious market is also something to be added to the uniqueness of this system: "What America never had was an absolutist state and its ecclesiastical counterpart, a caesaro-papist state church." (Casanova 1994, 29). Third, the work of grassroots organizations (many of them associated with churches) in solving community problems in the US is an organic feature of the system, given a historical mistrust of the state. Fourth, in the American system, there is conscious and free choice of congregation (Warner 1993; Wuthnow 1988). Once the choice is made, the church goer trusts the clergy, and develops strong bonds with co-parishioners (Smidt 2003), thus potentially leading to social capital.

The question then becomes: what makes certain churches more prone to contribute to social capital formation in different democratic contexts? In the next sections we discuss a few inhibitors and facilitators of religiously constructed social capital.

Structural constraints faced by churches in the creation of social capital

Smidt (2003, 36-37) claims that the democratic potential of religious involvement is influenced by three structural factors: horizontal relationships between members are more conducive to social capital, and so are smaller congregations; some religious organizations may not aim to activate social capital since they perceive their mission as more oriented towards satisfying spiritual needs; some religious organizations feel that they are too small to get involved in solving social matters. However, Nancy Ammerman (1997) suggests that religious organizations may contribute to social capital, since they do benefit (in the US) of higher levels of credibility.

Churches and religious organizations are not totally free in making the decision to cultivate social capital. Wood (1999) lists the challenges that churches face in their formation and preservation of internal political culture. First, churches need to maintain stability along both

organizational lines and in terms of individual involvement. Second, the leaders need to have the ability to interpret the complex political environment. Third, the church has to act effectively in the public realm.

It becomes then obvious that the effects of religious participation on social capital are conditioned by structural constraints. From a conceptual perspective, these structural constraints refer to both internal constraints within churches and the constraints placed on them by the broader political, social and cultural context. Secularization, religious pluralism and tradition can be significant structural factors.

Furthermore, social capital can be created in religious organizations as well (Smidt 2003). The constraints on the latter are similar to those mentioned above, with one major caveat: religious organizations playing a strong social role are not the norm in every single democracy. In fact, international religious organizations (such as Caritas, World Vision) may be perceived as alien and not enjoy popular support. In consolidating democracies, civil society and its organizations do not have a long history and are integrated in society in different degrees while sometimes being affected by suspicions of representing foreign interests (Carothers 1999; Kaldor and Vojvoda 1997).

The effect of church-going on social capital formation needs to be considered at both individual and community level. If going to church has a positive effect on developing civic skills, one needs to consider whether these skills remain at the individual level or whether such empowering may in fact affect the potential for civic engagement of an entire community. In other words, if civic skills are learnt within the church, would the confidant make use of them for his own political efficacy, or would they be used in the benefit of the religious community?

The structuring of the religious space within a community may also influence the type of social capital being created. In a historically religious pluralistic space, competition between different religious organizations is shown to increase religious participation (Finke and Iannacone 1993; Finke and Stark 1998). However, data on religious participation around the world does not fully support this finding (Radu 2016). Also, minority churches functioning in a one church dominated system may encourage action and engagement, although it is

not self-evident whether such mobilization may lead to bridging social capital or to radicalization and bonding social capital.

Churches are institutions, and, as such, are influenced in their service providing mission by both internal structural constraints, relating to their own survival and doctrine, and external structural limitations. In the case of the latter, external constraints affecting a church's potential for constructing social capital is a function of both state-church relationship and also (perhaps, more importantly) a function of the social understandings of the role of church and religion within society. These structural constraints should be examined in-depth before making general arguments regarding a church's potential to contribute to social capital creation.

The traditional role of church in a society – changing realities

The roles assumed by churches and religious organizations within a society are tributary to complex historical evolutions. In most democracies, separation between church and state exists (in different degrees). Moreover, a discourse on inevitable secularization pervaded the social sciences up until recently. Its result pressured scholars to re-think the roles played by religion and church. An ideologically mandated secularization process may in fact push churches to embrace anti-democratic and anti-liberal positions.

According to Casanova (1994), secularization is not an all-encompassing inevitable process. He argues that churches can "push" issues into the public sphere, make them salient, and thus force societies to contemplate their own understanding of good and bad, their own normative standards. Through the church, morality becomes an essentially inter-subjective concept – a public concern. Of course not all religions are fit for this task of resetting normative standards, but as long as a particular civil religion has internalized the Enlightenment criticism, it seems that it will serve as true opponent to the differentiated spheres of our societies, forcing them to specify and change their claims over good and bad. Public religions can revitalize modern public sphere.

Following Casanova, we argue that the place of religion within society varies between both societies and, within them, between different moments in time (Radu 2016). Even if most churches do take on social duties, confidants' involvement at every step of the way in formulating and implementing such programs is not the rule in every church. The role played by churches in solving social issues is surely influenced by traditional conceptualizations of the mission of churches within society, which, in turn, is a result of different secularization processes.

Furthermore, the importance of tradition in influencing the relationship between church going and increasing social capital is not to be taken lightly. Prevalent social understandings vis-à-vis the role of religion in society may place a high premium on assuming a social mission, but it is not mandatory to do so. Alternatively, religion and church may be understood as primarily creators of meaning or moral agents. As such, their effect on social capital may not be significant. Practices of church going also differ from case to case, and, in some churches, attending religious service may be more of a ritualistic act, without implying much social interaction (in the absence of which social capital cannot be constructed).

Finally, one contextual feature of different religious communities that may affect their social capital is the association between religious and ethnic or national identity. Since democratization was sometimes simultaneous with construction or re-assertion of nationhood, some churches have re-established their roles in preserving national identity. In such situations, it is possible to instrumentalize religious identity in order to create exclusive understandings of nationhood, and promote an "*us vs. them*" type of identity formation (Radu 2016). Moreover, if mainstream churches in some democratic contexts perceive secularization as an invasive global trend, they may react by emphasizing the need for coming back into the church for fulfilling spiritual needs exclusively.

Churches and social capital – the individual perspective

So far, we have only discussed about the constraints affecting churches in developing their potential to cultivate social capital. However, this

discussion would be one sided should we not include the confidant's perspective. In other words, we argue that such social capital development via church participation can happen mostly if participants expect it or allow it to happen. If church participation emphasizes civic skills formation, then church goers may acquire them, but such acquisition is most effective if confidants perceive the act of participating as something more than religious performance. One can assume that within the American congregational tradition, the choice of such congregation is influenced by social, racial, or economic concerns, in addition to religious compatibility. Consequently, the expectation to get involved in social programs is a given. However, in other contexts, church going may be a religious act, fundamentally motivated by dogma or ritual. Furthermore, perceptions of church going are socially embedded. As such, one may feel an obligation to participate in religious services because of social desirability. Some churches privilege the social interaction aspect of church going, while others may only be focusing rather on the service itself. The argument is further complicated by the size of the congregation: traditional hierarchical churches functioning in large cities might not be able to create more of a community feeling because of the high number of parishioners, and their fast turnover. Finally, switching from a church to another is also a possibility of influencing both community and expectations. However, the easiness and social acceptability of such acts varies dramatically according to context.

It is certain that not all churches function alike. Some emphasize their social mission, while others place a premium on religious teaching, and emphasize salvation and the after-life. Some are especially keen on preserving rituals, while others accentuate the need for proper communication among members and the creation of a strong community. Some are symbols of national identity, while others are mere components of mosaic-like overlapping identities. All of these differences influence and condition a church's potential for creating social capital. Religious pluralism, secularization, social norms regarding the place and status or religion and church within society are all important in assessing the potential of religiously grown social capital. Moreover, social capital, as a Western developed concept is

difficult to transfer in other contexts. We do not believe that its Western roots render it inconsequential for research in other parts of the world, although, it must be stressed, that its purported relationship with democracy questions its applicability universally.

Finally, we offer two recommendations that may foster more contextual research. First, it is critical to understand that the interpretations of church going acts differ from society to society. While in some places it is an expression of faith and ritual, in others it is mostly a measure of social involvement. Understanding the prevalent interpretations of church going in each context becomes a research priority. Second, tradition and secularization/de-secularization are constraining factors putting pressure on churches. Churches are institutions, and, as such, need to ensure their own survival. Heavily rooted within a social, economic and political context, churches have different objectives to attend to, and creating civic skills may be one of them, or, in some cases, it may not be one at all. Therefore, a dynamic understanding of the church's mission and roles within society is absolutely necessary in avoiding errors induced by static monolithic understandings of religion.

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